

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING ON S.B. 1012
MARCH 15, 2011

Co-Chairs and Members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to address you today.

I am the senior orientation and mobility specialist on staff at the State Board of Education and Services for the Blind and work in the Adult Services division. For almost thirty years I have taught blind adults and children how to travel safely and independently in Connecticut. I am here today to urge you to vote against Senate Bill 1012, which would dissolve BESB and split the divisions between the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services.

Instead of strengthening services and creating efficiencies, I believe it would have the opposite effect. Dividing BESB would dilute the expertise that has been carefully cultivated and nurtured over the hundred plus years since a previous legislature saw the need for special services for the blind and acted to create a separate state agency to provide them.

Blindness is a comprehensive disability which affects nearly every aspect of a person's life. It denies or severely hinders everyday tasks such as driving, reading, walking around, and performing daily living tasks. It demands very specialized knowledge and expertise to help blind persons to compensate for and overcome its effects. In state government, BESB is the repository of that knowledge and expertise.

When I first began working at BESB, orientation and mobility services to children were minimal. The focus was on teaching adults how to use a long cane and navigate the environment. However, members of the mobility staff came to realize that many of the travel problems we saw in adults, particularly those adults who had been blind since birth, could be addressed and greatly moderated by working with them when they were young. Since BESB was one unit and the teachers of the visually impaired who worked with children had their offices in the same building, it was easy to discuss our ideas with them and begin seeing children on their caseloads. This naturally led to a greater involvement with children and the provision of much more mobility services to them. Now, blind children regularly receive long cane training and lessons in how to travel around their schools, neighborhoods, and communities. This early mobility service would not have so easily and naturally developed if there had been two physically separated and administratively different divisions.

This important collaboration among the different divisions at BESB continues to this day. On numerous occasions staff members and expertise have been shared to develop unique and creative programs. One program I was involved with included field trips for blind teens to Boston and New York City. These trips addressed mobility, daily living, and social skill areas. Another collaborative program is the weeklong Skills for Life program in which middle and high school students not only learn and practice skills, but also often develop lifelong friendships.

While there are many good ideas for creating efficiencies in state government, passage of this bill is not one of them. It takes similar services that are already centralized in one place and moves them to several places. Splitting BESB would make it harder and ultimately more frustrating for the blind and visually impaired to access services.

When I first started at BESB in 1981, the number of blind persons registered in Connecticut was approximately 6000. Presently, this number has doubled to 12,000. The incidence of blindness continues to grow, particularly among the elderly. With an aging baby boomer population, it will be more important than ever to make available expert services under one roof.

I urge you to preserve BESB as a separate state agency so that the blind citizens of Connecticut will continue to reap the benefits of a unified service delivery system that has the expertise and knowledge needed to effectively address their needs.

Thank you for your time and attention.

John Waiculonis

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